

Boston YO Strategy Promotes Collaboration to Help Young Offenders

[The Mayor's Office of Jobs & Community Development in Boston, MA is one of 36 programs that received funding under the Youth Opportunity Grant (YOG) Program from the US Department of Labor in February 2000. These programs, funded for five years, serve youth, ages 14-21, who live in federally designated Empowerment Zones, Enterprise Communities, and other high-poverty areas. Funding for the YOG programs is authorized under the Workforce Investment Act.]

Youth Opportunity grantees work with local partners to engage young people, both in and out-of-school, in a range of comprehensive and long-term youth development activities that help young people stay in school, attend college, or enter skills training or employment. More information on the Youth Opportunity Grant program is available on the Internet at: http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/yog.asp]

Introduction

The Boston Youth Opportunity (YO) Program has developed a five-phase strategy to increase collaboration between the YO and law enforcement agencies. The Boston YO program designates a YO Law Enforcement Coordinator to coordinate and oversee these efforts.

Other YO sites will want to “customize” this approach to address local factors and conditions. However, the Boston model offers a framework for thinking about how to engage community law enforcement partners in order to better serve young offenders and at-risk youth.

In the following piece, Amy Chris, who works with the Boston YO program, describes Boston's strategy. For more information, please contact: Amy Chris at (617) 541-2609 or email: amy.chris.jcs@ci.boston.ma.us.

Background

The Challenge of Engaging Young Offenders

Collaboration with the law enforcement community is an essential part of engaging and retaining members in your Youth Opportunity (YO) program. Most, if not all, youth who have been arrested and/or detained have experienced a lack of support or appropriate services during their lives. As a result, many youth engage in negative behaviors for which they have been arrested. Unfortunately, the current system incarcerates youth or places them on probation, but rarely provides the services that young people need to change their mindsets and engage in more positive behavior. Too often, the system returns youth to the same environments from which they came, without equipping them with new skills and resources. We expect a different result; however, we are all aware that most of these kids reenter their communities and shortly thereafter re-offend.

The YO program supports a range of strategies for sites to work with their local law enforcement partners to provide youth with the services they need in order to be successful in their communities. We have the rare opportunity to give these youth, who have often been written off by many as “bad kids” or “hopeless,” a second chance. We have the means to empower young people to change their lives and become positive members of their community and we must do just that.

Phase One: Identify and Connect with Appropriate Individuals Within Law Enforcement Agencies

In order to collaborate with law enforcement agencies your YO must identify those individuals within each organization who: 1) have access to youth; and 2) have a desire to serve youth in need of services. Your efforts are more likely to succeed if the YO program has established some type of agreement with those in supervisory positions before interaction can occur with agency workers. In order for an employee to feel empowered to make referrals to YO, he/she must feel that his/her organization is in support of the program. Therefore, phase one focuses on establishing contact and building relationships with those individuals who have the ability to make decisions and enact initiatives in his/her organization.

Phase Two: Getting to Know the Culture of Law Enforcement Agencies

After you make initial contact, the YO Law Enforcement Coordinator will meet individually with designated staff from the law enforcement agencies in order to better understand how each organization operates. These meetings are intended to help the Coordinator determine how to implement the YO referral system most effectively. The referring agency should understand the benefits of working with YO. These include increasing the agency’s capacity to serve youth offenders or youth at-risk. The goal is to ensure that agencies do not see YO as an initiative that will undermine their mission of arrest, prosecution, or the enforcement of probation/parole stipulations.

Because YO sites represent diverse communities, the actual referral process will vary across YO sites depending on the role of the agency within the law enforcement community. Some possible processes might include:

Detention Facilities

After a young person is sentenced and committed to custody, the law enforcement agency will review the youth’s case at a standard staffing meeting to develop a service plan for the individual. During this intake, agency staff could refer all youth in need of services who live within the Empowerment Zone (EZ) or Enterprise Community (EC) to the YO program.

If there are detention facilities located within the EZ/EC, these facilities serve as the residential address for incarcerated youth; thus, all facilities within the EZ/EC can refer appropriate youth to YO. This arrangement facilitates re-entry planning with the young person. Ideally, six months before release, YO caseworkers and corrections officers work with the young person to establish release plans that promote the youth's continued growth and development as he/she is reintegrated into the community. During this time, YO staff can meet with youth to do intakes, assessments, create a service plan, and begin doing preliminary work (i.e. in house job readiness trainings, GED prep, etc.)

After his/her release, the young person should immediately begin working with his/her case manager at the YO site to continue implementing the development plan that has been ongoing for the previous six months. These youth are coming from a very structured environment and are often extremely nervous about returning to their communities. Participation in the YO program gives them the structure they want, the accountability and support they need, and the hope they deserve.

District Attorney's (DA) Office

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts requires that the DA's Office convene multi-agency Community Based Juvenile Justice (CBJJ) Roundtables. These meetings include representatives of the Boston Police Department, Department of Social Services, Department of Youth Services and school personnel. At the roundtables, these representatives discuss how their agencies may intervene so that at-risk youth do not fall through the "cracks" of the system. Although CBJJ has been able to serve a number of youth, frustration has arisen over lack of resources to which to refer the kids. This is a gap that YO can certainly fill. If your state does not convene such meetings, it is best to start with the person at the DA's Office who is in charge of community outreach. Try to work with him/her individually in order to create a plan tailored to the needs of the area.

Boston Police, Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (Subway) Police, School Police, Boston Housing Authority Police:

Police and youth generally interact in three situations. Each one creates an opportunity for collaboration with YO. They include:

- 1) **The police make an arrest.** During the actual arrest, it is not likely that the officer or agency will refer the youth to YO immediately. However, if officers know about the YO program, they have a chance to offer a proactive and preventative program to the individual.
- 2) **The police see a youth hanging out on the street with his/her friends and have the right to ask the youth's name and school (FIO: Field identification Observation)**(many officers have repeatedly expressed a feeling of powerlessness during these encounters); and

- 3) **The youth participates in police-sponsored programming.** Never underestimate the willingness of youth and community service officers to get involved in boxing or basketball tournaments. Police officers often want to engage in positive interactions with youth but often do not know how to arrange them. Invite your local officers to parties and events you have in your YO centers. If we are really going to create community change, we have to start by creating relationships between groups, who in the past may not have appreciated, respected, and understood each other.

Police Social Workers

The Youth Service Providers Network (YSPN), comprised of social workers funded by the Boston Police Department, allows for additional access to arrested youth. YSPN social workers receive referrals from police officers that have arrested youth and who feel that these young people would benefit from counseling services. Thus, YSPN serves youth in the first group—those who are arrested. While YSPN provides the clinical therapeutic component, they are in constant need of resources for their clients. YO is a logical partner for this endeavor. This section may not be applicable to all YO sites since few communities have such social workers in place.

Probation/ Office of Community Corrections

Although probation and parole officers can provide vital services to court-involved youth, they are not equipped and too understaffed to know all of the community resources available for at-risk youth. Once a youth is assigned to a probation/parole officer (PO), that officer does an intake/assessment to identify those services the young person currently receives and any gaps in service delivery.

However, due to extremely large caseloads, the PO can often do little more than ensure that the youth meets probation requirements (i.e. the youth is showing up for appointments or coming for drug screens). Thus, probation officers, who have determined at intake that the youth needs additional services, could use the YO program as a source for referrals.

School

Although schools have a mandate to educate students, school personnel are increasingly called upon to act as therapists, mentors, police officers, and mediators. Thus, school administrators and teachers are crying out for additional resources to help service their students. Most youth in need of assistance are referred to Student Support Coordinators (SSC) or school counselors. Your YO must establish relationships with these individuals in order to effectively target the student population. Regular contact through meetings and check-ins is highly encouraged in order to ensure that the students are receiving appropriate services.

Phase Three: Implementing, Assessing and Perfecting the Referral System

After establishing a referral process for each agency, it is important to assess its effectiveness. The YO program can create a standard referral form; however, each

agency has unique needs and policies that YO must continue to address separately. This is perhaps the most important phase; yet, it is perhaps the most difficult to anticipate.

For example, in Boston, YO staff visit incarcerated youth in the detention facilities. Although the youth are in one location at intake, when they return to the community they live all over the city. Because we have sixteen case managers and eight career specialists, it became difficult to track referrals and make sure that none of these individuals were falling through the cracks. In order to ensure quality and efficient service, we assigned one case manager per team (there are four teams which cover different sections of the community) to be the point person for all youth coming out of the Department of Youth Services facilities. These case managers were chosen for their desire to work with “hard to serve” youth and their ability to reach this population.

Phase Four: Establishing a Law Enforcement Council

While most law enforcement officials engage with youth, these interactions usually occur under punitive conditions. The police officer arrests, the DA prosecutes, the probation officer enforces, and the caseworker/corrections officer detains. However, the YO program gives these individuals the opportunity to make a positive and proactive impact in a young person’s life. Therefore, it becomes the secondary role of YOG to support law enforcement officials and empower them to serve youth.

Keep in mind that these are our youth that they are dealing with. If we can influence how they interact with them, we certainly want to. In this effort, it helps for law enforcement employees to know that they are not alone and that their actions do not occur in isolation. After your YO program defines its role and establishes a trusting relationship with each agency, a law enforcement council should be created. This council should consist of a representative from each agency and YO staff, and should convene regularly. Referrals may be brought to these meetings; however, the overarching goal should be to establish a cohesive body in which community trends/concerns and the role of YO within them will be discussed.

Phase Five: Becoming a Court Referred Program

In addition to engaging the DA’s Office and Department of Probation, YO can also work with two other key officials in the court system for program referrals: the clerk magistrate and the judge.

When a criminal charge is filed against a youth and it is not clear whether it is appropriate for a judge to hear the case, the alleged offender has a preliminary hearing with a clerk magistrate. During this hearing the magistrate will hear the facts of the case and make his/her ruling. In almost all cases, the youth needs services. Because YO is a comprehensive, long-term program, it is able to meet many of these needs. Thus, in order for YO to serve youth offenders, the clerk magistrate must: 1) be aware of YO; 2) understand how to access YO through the law enforcement coordinator; and 3) feel as if YO will indeed provide quality services to referred individuals.

Once you establish relationships with the clerk magistrate and demonstrate the efficacy of YO, the next step is to approach the judge. In his/her ruling, a judge can mandate any intervention/service that he/she feels is appropriate for the individual. YO offers a community-based alternative to incarceration and could be a referral resource in many cases. However, in order for a judge to consider referring a young offender to the YO program, YO must establish a “track” record of timely and effective interventions.

The best way to achieve this is to create a quality program that has a record of:

1) receiving referrals and processing them quickly; 2) following up with the agency or person who referred the youth and letting them know the name of the assigned case manager, how to contact the case manager, and explaining the case plan for the youth; 3) engaging the youth in ongoing activities and services; 4) delivering on any promises that have been made to the youth and/or agency; and 5) continuing an open dialogue with the referring agency and other service providers involved in the young person’s life.

The final “frontier” in this process is creating a diversion program where the court orders a young offender to attend YO programming in lieu of punitive sentencing with the understanding that non-compliance will lead to criminal charges. Establishing a diversion program is a long-term goal of your YO. Creating such a program requires that YO work with the DA’s Office to determine whether the diversion will occur pre or post arraignment (this is not a small issue and is intrinsically laden with difficult legal issues). Next, YO must prove to the chief justices of the appropriate courts that the program does indeed have programming which will meet the needs of the referred individuals.

Finally, the Department of Probation must agree that their officers will supervise the individual on behalf of the court and bring the offender back in front of the judge if he/she does not comply with the requirements of the YO program. Because YO programs operate in diverse communities, this process will look different for each site and may vary according to the needs and personalities of individual judges. Start with one judge first and work from there. Proving yourself in one place is the best way to gain access to another.

Summary

An effective strategy to serve young offenders and other at-risk youth through the Youth Opportunity Grant program involves the following key steps:

1. **Identify those front-line staff within local law enforcement agencies that work with youth and have a desire to serve youth in need of services.** Try to establish an interagency agreement with those in supervisory positions before YO staff begins to interact with their counterparts at the agency.
2. **Hold introductory working meetings that involve YO staff and staff from those law enforcement agencies you want to work with.** Use these meetings to

understand how the agency operates and what type of referral strategy would work most effectively.

3. **After establishing a referral process for each agency, it is important to assess its effectiveness.** A few point people may need to be assigned in order to effectively track and serve youth from various agencies. Some agencies may prefer written notification of the assigned case manager and the case plan, while others may require ongoing conversations.
4. **Establish a community law enforcement council.** Charge the council with meeting regularly to discuss changing community trends/concerns related to law enforcement and the role of YO program to address them.
5. **Create a diversion program.** Set a long-term goal of creating a diversion program that allows local judges to mandate participation in YO as an alternative to incarceration.

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